

# **SAN PANTALEONE**

GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO

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## SAN PANTALEONE

BY

GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO

The Translation by George McLean Harper.

### I.

The great sandy piazza, glittered as if strewn with powdered pumice. Its whitewashed houses held a strange metallic glow, like the walls of an immense furnace cooling off. The glare of the clouds, reflected from the stone pillars of the church at its far end, gave them the appearance of red granite. The church windows blazed as with inward fire. The sacred images had assumed life-like colors and attitudes, and the massive edifice seemed lifted now, in the splendor of the new celestial phenomenon, to a prouder domination than ever, above the houses of Radusa.

Groups of men and women, gesticulating and talking loudly, were pouring from the streets into the square. Superstitious terror grew in leaps and bounds from face to face. A thousand awful images of divine punishment rose out of their rude fancies; and comments, eager disputes, plaintive appeals, wild stories, prayers, and cries were mingled in a deep uproar, as of a hurricane approaching. For some time past this bloody redness of the sky had lasted through the night, disturbing its tranquillity, illumining sullenly the sleeping fields, and making dogs howl.

"Giacobbe! Giacobbe!" shouted some, waving their arms, who till then had stood in a compact band around a pillar of the church portico, talking in low tones, "Giacobbe!"

There came out through the main door, and drew near to those who called him, a long, emaciated man, apparently consumptive, whose head was bald at the top, but had a crown of long reddish hair about the temples and above the nape of the neck. His little sunken eyes, animated with the fire of a deep passion, were set close and had no particular color. The absence of his two upper front teeth gave to his mouth when speaking, and to his sharp chin with its few scattered hairs, the strangeness of a senile faun. The rest of his body was a wretched structure of bones ill-concealed by his clothes. The skin on his hands, his wrists, the back of his arms, and his breast was full of blue punctures made with a pin and india-ink, the souvenirs of

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sanctuaries visited, pardons obtained, and vows performed.

When the fanatic approached the group at the pillar, a swarm of questions arose from the anxious men. "Well, then? what did Don Console say? Will they send out only the silver arm? Would not the whole bust do better? When would Pallura come back with the candles? Was it one hundred pounds of wax? Only one hundred? And when would the bells begin to ring? Well, then? Well, then?"

The clamor increased around Giacobbe. Those on the outskirts of the crowd pushed toward the church. From all the streets people poured into the square till they filled it. And Giacobbe kept answering his questions, whispering, as if revealing dreadful secrets and bringing prophecies from far. He had seen aloft in the bloody sky a threatening hand, and then a black veil, and then a sword and a trumpet.

"Go ahead! Go ahead!" they urged him, looking in each other's faces, and seized with a strange desire to hear of marvels, while the wonder grew from mouth to mouth in the crowd.

## II.

The vast crimson zone rose slowly from the horizon to the zenith and bade fair to cover the whole vault of heaven. An undulating vapor of molten metal seemed pouring down on the roofs of the town; and in the descending crepuscule yellow and violet rays flashed through a trembling and iridescent glow. One long streak brighter than the others pointed towards a street which opened on the river—front, and at the end of this street the water flamed away between the tall slim poplar—trunks, and beyond the stream lay a strip of luxuriant country, from which the old Saracen towers stood out confusedly, like stone islets, in the dark. The air was full of the stifling emanations of mown hay, with now and then a whiff from putrefied silkworms in the bushes. Flights of swallows crossed this space with quick, scolding cries, trafficking between the river sands and the eaves.

An expectant silence had interrupted the murmur of the multitude. The name Pallura ran from lip to lip. Signs of angry impatience broke forth here and there. The wagon was not yet to be seen along the river—road; the candles had not come; Don Consolo therefore was delaying the exposition of the relics and the acts of exorcism; the danger still threatened. Panic fear invaded the hearts of all those people crowded together like a flock of sheep, and no longer venturing to raise their eyes to heaven. The women burst out sobbing, and at the sound of weeping every mind was oppressed and filled with consternation.

Then at last the bells began to ring. As they were hung low, their deep quivering strokes seemed to graze the heads of the people, and a sort of continuous wailing filled the intervals.

"San Pantaleone! San Pantaleone!"

It was an immense, unanimous cry of desperate men imploring aid. Kneeling, with blanched faces and outstretched hands, they supplicated.

"San Pantaleone!"

Then, at the church door, in the midst of the smoke of two censers, Don Consolo appeared, resplendent in a violet chasuble, with gold embroidery. He held aloft the sacred arm of silver, and conjured the air, shouting the Latin words:

"Ut fidelibus tuis aeris serenitatem concedere digneris. Te rogamus, audi nos."

At sight of the relic the multitude went delirious with affectionate joy. Tears ran from all eyes, and through

glistening tears these eyes beheld a miraculous gleam emanate from the three fingers held up as if in the act of benediction. The arm appeared larger now, in the enkindled air.

The dim light awoke strange scintillations in the precious stones. The balsamic odor of incense spread quickly to the nostrils of the devotees.

"Te rogamus, audi nos!"

But when the arm was carried back and the tolling stopped, in that moment of silence a tinkling of little bells was heard near at hand coming from the river road. Then of a sudden the crowd rushed in that direction and many voices cried:

"It is Pallura with the candles! It is Pallura coming! Here's Pallura!"

The wagon came screeching over the gravel, drawn at a walk by a heavy gray mare, over whose shoulders hung a great shining brass horn, like a half-moon. When Giacobbe and the others made towards her, the pacific animal stopped and breathed hard. Giacobbe, who reached the wagon first, saw stretched out on its floor the bloody body of Pallura, and screamed, waving his arms towards the crowd, "He is dead! He is dead!"

### III.

The sad news spread like lightning. People crowded around the wagon, and craned their necks to see, thinking no longer of the threats in the sky, because struck by the unexpected happening and filled with that natural ferocious curiosity which the sight of blood awakens.

"He is dead? What killed him?"

Pallura lay on his back upon the boards, with a broad wound in the middle of his forehead, with one ear torn, with gashes on his arms, his sides, and one thigh. A warm stream flowed down to his chin and neck, staining his shirt and forming dark, shining clots on his breast, his leathern belt, and even his breeches. Giacobbe hung over the body; all the rest waited around him; an auroral flush lighted up their perplexed faces; and at that moment of silence, from the river-bank arose the song of the frogs, and bats skimmed back and forth above the heads of the crowd.

Suddenly Giacobbe, straightening up, with one cheek bloody, cried:

"He is not dead. He still breathes."

A hollow murmur ran through the crowd, and the nearest strained forward to look. The anxiety of those at a distance commenced to break into clamor. Two women brought a jug of water, another some strips of linen. A youth held out a gourd full of wine.

The wounded man's face was washed; the flow of blood from his forehead was checked; his head was raised. Then voices inquired loudly the cause of this deed. The hundred pounds of wax were missing; only a few fragments of candles remained in the cracks of the wagon-bed.

In the commotion their minds grew more and more inflamed, exasperated, and contentious. And as an old hereditary hatred burned in them against the town of Mascalico, on the opposite bank of the river, Giacobbe said venomously, in a hoarse voice:

"What if the candles have been offered to San Gonselvo?"

It was like the first flash of a conflagration! The spirit of church—rivalry awoke all at once in these people brutalized by many years of blind, savage worship of their own one idol. The fanatic's words flew from mouth to mouth. And beneath the tragic dull—red sky, the raging multitude resembled a tribe of mutinous gypsies.

The name of the saint broke from all throats, like a war—cry. The most excited hurled curses towards the river, and waved their arms and shook their fists. Then all these faces blazing with anger, and reddened also by the unusual light, all these faces, broad and massive, to which their gold ear—rings and thick overhanging hair gave a wild, barbaric character, all these faces turned eagerly towards the man lying there, and grew soft with pity. Women, with pious care, tried to bring him back to life. Loving hands changed the cloths on his wounds, sprinkled water in his face, set the gourd of wine to his lips, made a sort of pillow under his head.

"Pallura, poor Pallura, won't you answer?" He lay supine, his eyes closed, his mouth half open, with brown soft hair on his cheeks and chin, the gentle beauty of youth still showing in his features contracted with pain. From beneath the bandage on his forehead a mere thread of blood trickled down over his temples; at the corners of his mouth stood little beads of pale red foam, and from his throat issued a faint broken hiss, like the sound of a sick man gargling. About him attentions, questions, feverish glances multiplied. The mare from time to time shook her head and neighed in the direction of the houses. An atmosphere as of an impending hurricane hung over the whole town.

Then from the square rang out the screams of a woman, of a mother. They seemed all the louder for the sudden hushing of all other voices, and an enormous woman, suffocated in her fat, broke through the crowd and hurried to the wagon, crying aloud. Being heavy and unable to climb into it, she seized her son's feet, with sobbing words of love, with such sharp broken cries and such a terribly comic expression of grief, that all the bystanders shuddered and averted their faces.

"Zaccheo! Zaccheo! My heart, my joy!" screamed the widow unceasingly, kissing the feet of the wounded man and dragging him to her towards the ground.

The wounded man stirred, his mouth was contorted by a spasm, but although he opened his eyes and looked up, they were veiled with damp, so that he could not see. Big tears began to well forth at the corners of his eyelids and roll down over his cheeks and neck. His mouth was still awry. A vain effort to speak was betrayed by the hoarse whistling in his throat. And the crowd pressed closer, saying:

"Speak, Pallura! Who hurt you? Who hurt you? Speak! Speak!"

Beneath this question was a trembling rage, an intensifying fury, a deep tumult of reawakened feelings of vengeance; and the hereditary hatred boiled in every heart.

"Speak! Who hurt you? Tell us! Tell us!"

The dying man opened his eyes again; and as they were holding his hands tightly, perhaps this warm living contact gave him a momentary strength, for his gaze quickened and a vague stammering sound came to his lips. The words were not yet distinguishable. The panting breath of the multitude could be heard through the silence. Their eyes had an inward flame, because all expected one single word.

"Ma Ma Mascalico "

"Mascalico! Mascalico!" shrieked Giacobbe, who was bending over him, with ear intent to snatch the weak

syllables from his dying lips.

An immense roar greeted the cry. The multitude swayed at first as if tempest-swept. Then, when a voice, dominating the tumult, gave the order of attack, the mob broke up in haste. A single thought drove these men forward, a thought which seemed to have been stamped by lightning upon all minds at once: to arm themselves with some weapon. Towering above the consciousness of all arose a sort of bloody fatality, beneath the great tawny glare of the heavens, and in the electric odor emanating from the anxious fields.

#### IV.

And the phalanx, armed with scythes, bill-hooks, axes, hoes, and guns, reunited in the square before the church. And all cried: "San Pantaleone!"

Don Consolo, terrified by the din, had taken refuge in a stall behind the altar. A handful of fanatics, led by Giacobbe, made their way into the principal chapel, forced the bronze grille, and went into the underground chamber where the bust of the saint was kept. Three lamps, fed with olive oil, burned softly in the damp air of the sacristy, where in a glass case the Christian idol glittered, with its white head surrounded by a broad gilt halo; and the walls were hidden under the wealth of native offerings.

When the idol, borne on the shoulders of four herculean men, appeared at last between the pillars and shone in the auroral light, a long gasp of passion ran through the waiting crowd, and a quiver of joy passed like a breath of wind over all their faces. And the column moved away, the enormous head of the saint oscillating above, with its empty eye-sockets turned to the front.

Now through the sky, in the deep, diffused glow, brighter meteors ploughed their furrows; groups of thin clouds broke away from the hem of the vapor zone and floated off, dissolving slowly. The whole town of Radusa stood out like a smouldering mountain of ashes. Behind and before, as far as eye could reach, the country lay in an indistinctly lucent mass. A great singing of frogs filled the sonorous solitude.

On the river-road Pallura's wagon blocked the way. It was empty, but still soiled, here and there, with blood. Angry curses broke suddenly from the mob. Giacobbe shouted:

"Let us put the saint in it!"

So the bust was placed in the wagon-bed and drawn by many arms into the ford. The battleline thus crossed the frontier. Metallic gleams ran along the files. The parted water broke in luminous spray, and the current flamed away red between the poplars, in the distance, towards the quadrangular towers. Mascalico showed itself on a little hill, among olive trees, asleep. The dogs were barking here and there, with a persistent fury of reply. The column, issuing from the ford, left the public road and advanced rapidly straight across country. The silver bust was borne again on men's shoulders, and towered above their heads amid the tall, odorous grain, starred with bright fireflies.

Suddenly a shepherd in his straw hut, where he lay to guard the grain, seized with mad panic at sight of so many armed men, started to run up the hill, yelling, "Help! Help!" And his screams echoed in the olive grove.

Then it was that the Radusani charged. Among tree-trunks and dry reeds the silver saint tottered, ringing as he struck low branches, and glittering momentarily at every steep place in the path. Ten, twelve, twenty guns, in a vibrating flash, rattled their shot against the mass of houses. Crashes, then cries, were heard; then a great commotion. Doors were opened; others were slammed shut. Window-panes fell shattered. Vases fell from the church and broke on the street. In the track of the assailants a white smoke rose quietly up through the incandescent air. They all, blinded and in bestial rage, cried, "Kill! kill!"

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A group of fanatics remained about San Pantaleone. Atrocious insults for San Gonselvo broke out amid waving scythes and brandished hooks:

"Thief! Thief! Beggar! The candles! The candles!"

Other bands took the houses by assault, breaking down the doors with hatchets. And as they fell, unhinged and shivered, San Pantaleone's followers leaped in, howling, to kill the defenders.

The women, half-naked, took refuge in corners, imploring pity. They warded off the blows, grasping the weapons and cutting their fingers. They rolled at full length on the floor, amid heaps of blankets and sheets.

Giacobbe, long, quick, red as a Turkish scimitar, led the persecution, stopping ever and anon to make sweeping imperious gestures over the heads of the others with a great scythe. Pallid, bare-headed, he held the van, in the name of San Pantaleone. More than thirty men followed him. They all had a dull, confused sense of walking through a conflagration, over quaking ground, and beneath a blazing vault ready to crumble.

But from all sides began to come the defenders, the Mascalicesi, strong and dark as mulattos, sanguinary foes, fighting with long spring-bladed knives, and aiming at the belly and the throat, with guttural cries at every blow.

The melee rolled away, step by step, towards the church. From the roofs of two or three houses flames were already bursting. A horde of women and children, wan-eyed and terror-stricken, were fleeing headlong among the olive trees. Then the hand-to-hand struggle between the males, unimpeded by tears and lamentations, became more concentrated and ferocious.

Under the rust-colored sky, the ground was strewn with corpses. Broken imprecations were hissed through the teeth of the wounded; and steadily, through all the clamor, still came the cry of the Radusani:

"The candles! The candles!"

But the enormous church door of oak, studded with nails, remained barred. The Mascalicesi defended it against the pushing crowd and the axes. The white, impassive silver saint oscillated in the thick of the fight, still upheld on the shoulders of the four giants, who refused to fall, though bleeding from head to foot. It was the supreme desire of the assailants to place their idol on the enemy's altar.

Now while the Mascalicesi fought like lions, performing prodigies on the stone steps, Giacobbe suddenly disappeared around the corner of the building, seeking an undefended opening through which to enter the sacristy. And beholding a narrow window not far from the ground, he climbed up to it, wedged himself into its embrasure, doubled up his long body, and succeeded in crawling through. The cordial aroma of incense floated in the solitude of God's house. Feeling his way in the dark, guided by the roar of the fight outside, he crept towards the door, stumbling against chairs and bruising his face and hands.

The furious thunder of the Radusan axes was echoing from the tough oak, when he began to force the lock with an iron bar, panting, suffocated by a violent agonizing palpitation which diminished his strength, blind, giddy, stiffened by the pain of his wounds, and dripping with tepid blood.

"San Pantaleone! San Pantaleone!" bellowed the hoarse voices of his comrades outside, redoubling their blows as they felt the door slowly yield. Through the wood came to his ears the heavy thump of falling bodies, the quick thud of knife-thrusts nailing some one through the back. And a grand sentiment, like the divine uplift of the soul of a hero saving his country, flamed up then in that bestial beggar's heart.



## V.

By a final effort the door was flung open. The Radusani rushed in, with an immense howl of victory, across the bodies of the dead, to carry the silver saint to the altar. A vivid quivering light was reflected suddenly into the obscure nave, making the golden candlesticks shine, and the organ-pipes above. And in that yellow glow, which now came from the burning houses and now disappeared again, a second battle was fought. Bodies grappled together and rolled over the brick floor, never to rise, but to bound hither and thither in the contortions of rage, to strike the benches, and die under them, or on the chapel steps, or against the taper-spikes about the confessionals. Under the peaceful vault of God's house the chilling sound of iron penetrating men's flesh or sliding along their bones, the single broken groan of men struck in a vital spot, the crushing of skulls, the roar of victims unwilling to die, the atrocious hilarity of those who had succeeded in killing an enemy, all this re-echoed distinctly. And a sweet, faint odor of incense floated above the strife.

The silver idol had not, however, reached the altar in triumph, for a hostile circle stood between. Giacobbe fought with his scythe, and, though wounded in several places, did not yield a hand's breadth of the stair which he had been the first to gain. Only two men were left to hold up the saint, whose enormous white head heaved and reeled grotesquely like a drunken mask. The men of Mascalico were growing furious.

Then San Pantaleone fell on the pavement, with a sharp, vibrant ring. As Giacobbe dashed forward to pick him up, a big devil of a man dealt him a blow with a bill-hook, which stretched him out on his back. Twice he rose and twice was struck down again. Blood covered his face, his breast, his hands, yet he persisted in getting up. Enraged by this ferocious tenacity of life, three, four, five clumsy peasants together stabbed him furiously in the belly, and the fanatic fell over, with the back of his neck against the silver bust. He turned like a flash and put his face against the metal, with his arms outspread and his legs drawn up. And San Pantaleone was lost.